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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses anti-intellectualism in the United States from a rural viewpoint, defines "ideology," and questions whether the psychology of gifted education is an ideology. Fear and loathing of intellectuals are identified with the working class, a view that distorts the role of intellectuals. A rural view of anti-intellectualism is presented that sees "intellect" as a social construction, cultivated and husbanded (or exploited and depleted) over time and generations. Because of intellect's social nature, the common good is wrapped up with stewardship of the intellect. This nexus of social construction and cross-generational legacy means that teaching and learning that care for the intellect must center on a generosity now anathema to American culture. Knowledge today is secretive; there are laws against sharing it. The interests that construct and market American culture are the same interests that increasingly direct the work of schools, and that also misdirect our perspectives on anti-intellectualism, not to mention intellect. Ideologies are defined as constructing the worldview of some "socially significant group." The psychology of gifted education does not constitute a worldview, and teachers of gifted children, much less psychologists of giftedness, are not a socially significant group. The psychology of gifted education is better understood as serving an ideology, not constituting one. The emphasis of gifted education is on ensuring economically successful lives for gifted kids rather than cultivating intellect for the common good. As in rural education, the aim of gifted education is to convince the most talented students that their future lies elsewhere than in their class or place of origin. The ideology that ensures the success of this aim appears as if from nowhere, out of the worldview of the class whose ideology it is. (SV)

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Paper presented during the Symposium, "Is the Psychology of Gifted Education an Ideology?" (with Aimee Howely, Ohio University; Jane Piirto, Ashland University; and Jean Petersen, Purdue University) at the annual meeting of the National Association for Gifted Children, Atlanta, Georgia, November 3, 2000.

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Anti-intellectualism and the Pedagogy of Gifted Education

Craig Howley

It's a strange project to write about anti-intellectualism and at the same time work so hard, as I do, to foil attempts to be viewed as an intellectual. The focus of my intellectual work, if writing about schooling and mucking about with great gobs of data can properly be called "intellectual work", is not really on gifted education but on school and district size in the rural context. In fact, the focus of all my work, mental and manual, is on—and especially *in*— the rural circumstance. Putting the care of animals and the soil together with reading and writing is what makes my life whole, and I've been unfulfilled for decades at a time not being able to arrange life in this fashion.

I start with this confession in order to frame the concept of "anti-intellectualism," which is usually understood to be prejudice against a group of people that somehow come to be identified as intellectuals. I mean, think about it. Do you personally *know* any intellectuals? Probably you'll say yes. But I'm not so sure how to answer this question myself.

Lots of people in higher education appear eager to have me *think of*

them as intellectuals. For myself, I'd rather do the work of the intellect than be thought any such thing, and this is especially the case with my most intimate relationships. Naturally, none of us wants to be thought stupid.

The vanity of wanting to be thought an intellectual, however, is something else again. So often this attempt to appear as an intellectual is a matter of vanity, of projecting a facade. Take Professor so-and-so: he or she must be an intellectual. "Yes, professor so-and-so, you're an idiot and an intellectual."

Clearly, on these terms, I am myself an anti-intellectual. It makes sense that I would write about anti-intellectualism. Engels wrote about capitalism. Why? His father owned a factory that he would inherit.

In fact, this is the right-wing view of anti-intellectualism: prejudice against individuals whose personae are constructed as representations of the intellectual for the benefit of the rest of us. We need to be careful about this construction. Where do we North Americans imagine that anti-intellectualism on these terms has prevailed most viciously? The Soviet Union under Stalin and the People's Republic under Mao. An interesting

and complex literature on the subject exists, and it includes the role of educators, and all is not so clear as we in the U.S. now imagine it to have been. Remember that Aimee said imagination was at the heart of ideology.

The suspicion of the working class toward the class fortunate enough to labor with their minds instead of their backs is legendary. One of the most hopeful moments in U.S. history--the grassroots Populist Movement, which spanned the late 19th and early 20th centuries--has been condemned as anti-intellectual on these terms by the great and articulate historian Richard Hofstadter.

The Populists, of course, worried about the fates of ordinary people, especially people working the land--which was most of us before 1917. Populists were suspicious of so-called intellectuals, advisors and consultants to business and government, who had just begun to establish their niche after the Civil War.

In any case, fear and loathing of intellectuals in the U.S. has become very conveniently identified with the working class. Is anti-intellectualism of this sort a representation of "*the truth*"? Does it happily miscontstruct

the role of intellectuals?

More importantly, what is "*the intellect*" and, more pointedly, has care of the intellect--whatever it is--been put in the hands of misconstructed intellectuals and removed from everyone else's hands? This would certainly be efficient, wouldn't it, along the lines of bigger and better? Some folks to specialize in intellect, others in flipping burgers. These questions have seldom been asked; answers have seldom been attempted. That alone should tell you something.

Partly because of our personal experience of the rural lifeworld, which is smaller and, we find, *more beautiful* than other lifeworlds we've experienced, we've been at pains over the years to articulate a very different version of anti-intellectualism. You could call it the left-wing version, if you were so inclined, but the idea owes a great debt to the work of some thoughtful conservatives like Daniel Bell and Jacques Barzun, scholars whom I detested as a young anti-intellectual. So you might in fact want to call it the rural view of anti-intellectualism. Whatever you call it, the assumptions that ground this view of anti-intellectualism accord with the

conclusions reached by the previous speaker.

Intellect, on this view, is a social construction, one which is cultivated and husbanded—or exploited and depleted—over time, and specifically, over the course of generations. Because of this social nature of "the intellect," the common good is inevitably wrapped up with stewardship of the intellect. Sadly, consideration of the common good is one of the key victims of being dumbed ceaselessly down. This is an ironic problem for academically able students, but it's an *absolute disaster* for communities and for the idea of community, no matter how useful it might be for the national interest. It's important how we care for intellect. It's important how we abuse it.

Now, this nexus of social construction and cross-generational legacy has evident implications for schooling. It means that teaching and learning that care for the intellect must center on a kind of generosity that has become anathema to American culture since the end of the Great Depression. Knowledge today is secretive. There are laws against sharing it. Knowledge is not just power, it's money. We propagandize students, for

this reason, to get all the schooling they can stand.

Nonetheless, many teachers are still drawn to their work in order to act out an intellectual generosity in an arena that is less hostile to it than is the American culture in general. Many of us do bear this cross. It is lonely work, but hopeful news.

I attributed a loss of generosity to something called "American culture." What's that? Isn't that hegemony, you might ask? Sure, and the interests that construct and market American culture, that oxymoron, an easy culture that requires so little cultivation that you'll never break a sweat, are the same interests that are increasingly directing the work of the schools, and the same ones that have very successfully misdirected our perspectives on anti-intellectualism, not to mention intellect. Who are these "*interests*"? Are they people or what? The seven deadly sins?

Perhaps it is time to address the main question. Is the psychology of giftedness an ideology? I don't think so.

I'd like to reference the thinking of a conservative and a radical on the topic of what ideology is. Most of our doctoral students were clueless about

ideology. Most of you might be clueless, and I fully admit to being practically clueless. The two thinkers are Terry Eagleton and Daniel Bell. Eagleton's the radical and Bell the conservative.

Bell has actually written that he's a conservative in culture, a liberal in politics, and a radical in economics. That confession is funny, but it makes him a conservative, since "liberal" is just another name for "conservative," only we Americans don't know it.

Daniel Bell is a sociologist. In 1973 he published a book about the coming of "postindustrial society." In a salient passage he observed that ideology can either restrict one's vision to the point of evil and ignorance, or it can become a powerful lens through which to examine and enlighten the world. That is, your ideology can make you a thug or it can make you smart and generous. This is interesting, but it sidesteps the question of what ideology might be. Still, it's useful to know that, in the view of a smart conservative, the same ideology can be good or bad under some circumstances. Until I read Bell, I'd thought that all conservatives were idiots, if not professors.

Terry Eagleton is a literary critic, more or less. English departments in universities, incidentally, are home to many radicals. Radicals are merely people who want to trace things to their roots, and for some reason such a tendency is regarded as threatening to the established order, regardless of whether the radical sits to the left or right in the bleachers. The word "radical" gets its bad name from the threat to the status quo. Don't you shudder when you hear it? Don't you think, "Some idiot is about to mess things up for us"? As with anti-intellectualism one can indeed see the operation of ideology in the very words we use and the way we use them.

In any case, Eagleton in a very amusing book titled simply *Ideology*, makes the key point. Ideologies construct the worldview of some "socially significant" group. The finer points of this idea include (a) whether the group is dominant or not; (b) whether the worldview is intentionally based on lies and distortion; and (c) whether or not the worldview simply emerges from the way a group structures experiences for everyone else.

If the psychology of gifted education is an ideology, then, according to Eagleton, it must represent the worldview of some socially significant group.

Clearly it cannot be the case that the psychology of gifted education is an ideology.

In the first place, no psychology is sufficiently complex to constitute a worldview with all the attendant religious, philosophical, economic, social, and political manifestations appertaining thereunto. Perhaps a handful of radical Mensa members have created such a worldview, but what would be the point of admitting that? Such an ideology would be largely without force or meaning, and that, even for Daniel Bell is the point.

In the second place, teachers of gifted kids, much less psychologists of gifts or giftedness, whether they work at Harvard or Yale, are not a socially significant group. This is not to deny that educators are not a socially significant group. It's more like saying orthodontists are not a socially significant group. Right or wrong, good or bad, ideologies derive their force and meaning from the waxing and waning influence of the groups that deploy them. (Aldous Huxley's dystopian new world has not yet come to pass. But it might yet.)

No, the psychology of gifted education--or more properly the practice

and existence of gifted education--is for the moment better understood as *serving* an ideology, not as constituting one. Instead, it is surely part of some other significant group's ideology.

Gifted education, as I presume we all know, has historical origins that belie an allegiance. Far from repudiating these origins, it has strengthened them. The emphasis is on ensuring economically successful lives for these kids—black, brown, and white, but especially poor as well as rich—far more often than it is on cultivating intellect in the name of the common good.

The field has a continuing problem with over-representation of the class it serves, not because of some design flaw in programs or in nature, but because the field has been elaborated over time to serve precisely that purpose.

Even when recruiting working class kids, the purpose is to help them leave rather than serve the working class. There is a parallel with rural education here, a field probably no one here cares about but Aimee and me, so perhaps the example will carry with it an aura of objectivity. In many, perhaps most, rural schools, the aim is to convince the most talented kids

that their future lies elsewhere. Schools act on purpose most of the time to remove the best and the brightest from rural communities. Where do these kids go? The same place the gifted go.

How does this work, ideologically speaking? From my seat in the bleachers, lies and distortions are definitely at work, but the success of this pedagogy is ensured by the fact that the relevant ideology appears as if from nowhere *out of the way the class whose ideology it is* has constructed the world. Progressive schools and teachers and administrators work in a wilderness alive with corporate savages. It is, after all, excellent work if you can get it.